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ABSTRACT

More choice in formats for library customers may mean more constraints on choices in materials acquisition. An increase in the number of formats libraries provide may, over time, substantially alter the quality and diversity of library collections. This ERIC Digest examines some of the costs and challenges presented by format proliferation and some strategies for addressing those challenges, particularly when an increase in the total budget for acquisitions is not a possibility. Discussion includes the role of audiovisual (AV) materials in increasing circulation and library visits, and the need for more study of current lending patterns to establish a clear mandate for unashamed purchase of AV materials by traditionally print-oriented librarians; the effect of format proliferation in radically changing the depth and diversity of a collection; and what public libraries can do to meet the challenges of offering format choice while maintaining quality of the collection. To avoid sacrificing quality and depth, libraries must be acutely aware of customer needs, be sure that the library has a clear and fiscally realistic focus of purpose, and cooperate with other libraries to share resources. (AEF)

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Format Proliferation in Public Libraries

By Norm Parry

Introduction: An Abundance of Choices

Libraries are all about choice. That is why there is more than one book in a library, more than one point of view, genre, subject, age level, edition, and format. At the core of their work, librarians may have to choose among the tens of thousands of new works published every year. Making those kinds of choices under the constraint of limited finances is not new to librarians. What is unprecedented is the number and kinds of choices librarians must make in response to the greater number of formats demanded by their customers. A list of the available formats for a particular work might include hardcover, paperback, large print, foreign language edition, audiocassette tape, book on CD, eBook, videocassette, and DVD.

A new John Grisham title may be produced in all of these formats in a relatively short period of time. Bestsellers and blockbusters are frequently released in several formats simultaneously: hardcover, large type, audiocassette tape (abridged and unabridged editions), CD, and eBook. By the time the movie is released—in videocassette *and* DVD—the book is typically available in paperback. Even the smallest public library will consider buying at least two copies of the book as soon as it is available to meet certain high demand. The total investment for just this one title in all of the formats listed would be substantial—about $200.

More choice in formats for library customers may mean more constraints on choices in materials acquisition. An increase in the number of formats libraries provide may, over time, substantially alter the quality and diversity of library collections. This ERIC Digest examines some of the costs and challenges presented by format proliferation and some strategies for addressing those challenges, particularly when an increase in the total budget for acquisitions is not a possibility.

The Silent AV Incursion

According to a 1998 *Library Journal*/Cahners Research survey of 486 public Libraries (Oder), audiovisual budgets had grown an average of 53% during the prior five years, while materials budgets had grown only 36%. In addition, some 96% of libraries buy audio books and 97% buy videos.

Sale and rental of audio books is a two billion-dollar-a-year business growing 30% annually, according to *U.S. News & World Report* (1998). At least three formats are represented in this market: audiocassette, CD and eBook.

While these numbers virtually shout to be heard over the cacophony of 80,000 print titles published each year, borrowing of videos and other AV materials may be at least partially responsible for increased circulation and library visits. AV materials circulate faster than print materials, due to shorter loan periods, higher turnover and their increasing popularity among library users.

In his excellent article in *Library Journal,* Oder quotes one respondent who noted, "For a time, AV was 40% of adult circulation." Much more study of current lending patterns is needed to establish a clear mandate for unashamed purchase of AV materials by traditionally print-oriented librarians. Until we have that information, librarians need to understand that it's really okay to buy entertainment in new formats. A new blockbuster video might not make an enduring cultural statement, but romance novels have had a place in public libraries for decades, and nobody feels guilty about their "mainly entertainment" status.

Choice Is Good—and Expensive

Providing choice—in viewpoint, subject, and access—is one of the essential functions of public libraries in a democratic society, where all inquiry not illegal is encouraged on the fundamental belief that informed citizens make informed social, political, economic and personal choices. By and large, most Americans generally accept choice and access as being in the public's best interest. But they are not without cost.

For every successful new format option in the entertainment/literary/cinema market, libraries must decide whether or not to support that format in addition to those currently supported. With any given level of acquisitions resources, any addition of choice for customers places additional constraints on library collection development. If you buy both the hardcover and the large type edition of a novel, can you also afford to buy the same novel on audiocassette, compact disk and eBook? Can you also continue to buy as many different titles?

Librarians must ask questions such as "Is this title going to be popular enough to justify purchasing the audiocassette (AC) version?" "Will it appeal to our known audiocassette using customers?" "Do they want abridged or unabridged?" And so on. In addition, the question of CD versus AC arises more ur-

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gently as the number of those people who own CD and AC players changes. For example, which media player are auto manufacturers installing as standard equipment in new models? Which format are truck drivers and fitness walkers asking for?

The addition of new formats may result in substitution for older, more traditional formats. The library may buy more AV titles, including video titles that don't have a print title analog, shifting budget allocations away from print titles. Budget increases, if any, may be allocated disproportionately to AV materials. The effect may be compounded during transitional periods of "upgrades" to new media: videocassette tape to DVD, for example. At the height of the transition, there is an indefinite period of time when it is necessary to buy both formats, even though it is very likely that one of them is on the way out.

Librarians have not stopped purchasing the hardcover edition in order to purchase the audiocassette tape. The effect of greater customer choice of format is to increase costs and to redistribute them. Greater choice in format may mean less selection of titles (and other library services, incidentally). You can slice the budget pie into more pieces, but you can't slice the pie bigger.

The effects of this format proliferation can occur in subtle and unexpected ways, radically changing the depth and diversity of a collection. As more funds go toward the acquisition of fewer titles, the collection becomes bibliographically narrower, shallower, and arguably duller. As format choice increases, title choice decreases.

What Can Be Done?

What can public libraries do to meet the challenges and seize the opportunities for improved service offered by greater format choice?

1. Continuously acknowledge and respond to customer demands, or the customer will go elsewhere. Library customers today expect a choice of format as well as title. In addition to closely monitoring customer preferences, librarians must watch for trends in technology and publishing. Unless libraries pay careful attention to current trends in related industries, they risk becoming the Edsels of the modern entertainment, culture and information marketplace.

2. Revisit the library's mission statement. Accelerating information technology advances made in the past twenty years represent a paradigm shift in library and information science. The library's mission, focus and goals may need to be modified to reflect a new and continuously changing information services marketplace.

3. Share and share again. Interlibrary loan (ILL) of materials is the most powerful answer librarians have to combat budget devouring, format proliferation. Public libraries must take advantage of the benefits of regional and cooperative library systems: unified public access catalogs, fast ILL transport systems, and coordinated central purchasing. Libraries have to be willing to share their holdings and contribute to the development of a system-wide core collection.

Conclusion

Public libraries face a crisis of choice. Increased choice of format for customers may mean decreased selection and diversity in collection development. Innocent as the increased choice of format may seem, with its allure and promise of offering greater benefits to customers, it may also diminish the quality and depth of the intellectual content that libraries strive to achieve. To avoid sacrificing quality and depth, libraries must be acutely aware of customer needs, be sure that the library has a clear and fiscally realistic focus of purpose, and cooperate with other libraries to share resources.

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